

# The Twinning Phenomenon

## 1. *Twins and Culture*

### TWINS IN OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE: MYTH AND RELIGION

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Any myth reflects the archaic conceptions of civilizations in a transhuman shape. Heroes and illustrious personalities grow into gods; mountains and earthquakes turn to stone-ejecting Cyclops. In its cosmic, earthly, and netherworld manifestations, myth thus becomes the natural substratum of any ancient religion, as well as the expression of the moral and social conceptions of a culture — to which, therefore, the study of mythology and, more generally, of ancient religious and ritual manifestations, brings us in closer contact.

Twins have an important place in this context: mythology frequently refers to them or the twinning phenomenon, and a sacred character seems to be attached to them since the most ancient times.

In ancient Egypt, for instance, it may be interesting to note the cult of the royal placenta, considered as the Pharaoh's twin (a conception that is still alive among certain African populations), or the idea of one's *Ka* or *astral body*, i.e., of one's twin, through whom it was supposed to be possible to operate with magical rituals to hit an enemy. Twin gods were worshipped by Babylonians and Assyrians, who also introduced them among astronomic constellations, and may be also found in the Persian and Veda religions.

In the classic world, then, the examples of twin gods and heroes are innumerable: from the famous twin sons of Zeus, the Dioscuri, or the opposite-sexed twin gods Apollo and Artemis (Diana), to the Homeric twin he-

roes (such as the sons of Diocles, both killed by Aeneas, or Esepus and Pedasus killed by Eurialus, etc.), and to Rome's founders, Romulus and Remus.

Since the most ancient times, a magic conception is connected to the twins, either in a positive or a negative sense, but often with some kind of a "fatidic" aspect (e.g., the Erinyes, the triplet avenging spirits who punished evildoers and inflicted madness). Such a two-faced approach to the phenomenon of twinning, that variously characterizes near-east, protomediterranean, classic, and other ancient civilizations, may still be found in contemporary primitive societies.

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### ATTITUDES TOWARDS TWINNING AMONG PRIMITIVE SOCIETIES

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In primitive societies twinning raises emotions varying from extreme terror through the whole gamut of fear, repugnance, suspicion, anxiety, perplexity, hope, and joy. The first impulse prevailing among the less civilized people seems to be to regard twins as unnatural and monstrous, and therefore as portending evil. Accordingly, they must be put to death and the offence repudiated. This negative attitude stems from a series of explanations which can generally be connected with the widespread belief in superfactation and double paternity. In a few cases, only, would the custom of sacrificing twins arise from economic necessities rendering the simultaneous raising of two infants almost impossible. However, in many agricultural primitive tribes,